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Interview With Brian Jenkins, Expert on Terrorism

As Violence Spreads, Is U.S. Next?

This country seems to enjoy rare immunity from the kind of terrorism that plagues Europe, the Mideast, Latin America. But a leading authority now sees new trends that could change the picture.

Q Mr. Jenkins, is terrorism worldwide increasing or declining?

A It's growing. I can say that with confidence. At the Rand Corporation, we maintain a chronology of international terrorism that goes back to 1968. There are peaks and valleys, but the overall trajectory from 1968 through 1980 is up. Our findings coincide with the separate chronologies maintained by the CIA and other intelligence organizations.

Terrorism also is becoming more violent in the sense that there is a greater willingness on the part of the terrorist to kill—perhaps also a greater willingness to be killed. Our statistics at Rand show that in 1970 more than one person was killed in only 4.8 percent of all terrorist incidents. With a few minor dips, that figure has gone up steadily and reached 10.3 percent in 1979. It was close to that level in 1980.

Q How do you explain the apparent immunity of the United States from the kind of terrorism that is widespread elsewhere?

A The perception that we have been relatively immune to terrorism in this country is not entirely accurate. If we look at the countries that have suffered most from terrorism over the past 10 years, we find the United States in the top 10 in terms of the number of terrorist incidents.

One reason why we tend not to notice this is that the vast majority of politically motivated terrorist activity in this country is directed at property, not people. If we were to count only incidents with victims, we would drop down somewhat. Still, we've had approximately 80 politically motivated killings in this country in the past decade—for example, people assassinated by right-wing Cuban groups or killed in bomb blasts by Puerto Rican separatists. Another reason for the perception of relatively little terrorism is that we have had few terrorist spectacles. Finally, we tend not to notice terrorist violence because it is overwhelmed by the volume of ordinary violent crime in this country. When you have about 20,000 criminal homicides in a year, it's awfully hard to notice 80 political murders in a decade.

Q But why is there so little of the sustained, organized terrorism that plagues Spain, France, Italy and other countries?

A We lack the basis for it. Ideological or ethnic conflict is



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the engine that drives the sustained levels of terrorism in the European countries. The United States, to be sure, has numerous ethnic minorities. But we don't have geographic concentrations of ethnic minorities with their own unique history and territorial demands.

We have no equivalent of the Basque provinces, Brittany, Sardinia or Corsica—with a single exception: Puerto Rico. And it's noteworthy that Puerto Rican separatism is the most persistent source of political violence in this country and probably our biggest terrorist problem right now.

Similarly, the United States has escaped the major ideological contests that divided many European and Asian countries in the 20th century. Marxism or fascism—indeed, ideology of any kind—has never really taken root in the United States. We just don't have ideological divisions, which are an important factor behind terrorism elsewhere.

Q Why haven't protest groups like the Weather Underground or Black Panthers survived as terrorist movements?

A Some credit is owed to the American political system, which has an enormous co-optive capacity. I mean that in the best sense of the word. It can incorporate an enormous diversity within its political parties and still preserve the cohesiveness of the political system.

Look at the history of protest movements in America—the Wobblies of the Industrial Workers of the World at the turn of the century, the Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army of the civil-rights movement, the various anti-Vietnam War groups. You find that the political system co-opted the grievances of the broader movement and, in many cases, co-opted the best of their leaders. This means that the political system robbed the terrorists of a constituency.

Q Does this mean that the danger of a major outbreak of terrorism in this country in the future can be ruled out?

A No, because some fundamental changes may be taking place in American society in the long run that would imperil that co-optive capacity. Some of those engines of terrorism that didn't exist here in the past could emerge. One would be a major shift in people's perception of the economy.

Q How could that give rise to terrorism?

A It has always been a part of American lore that wealth is virtually unlimited. If not enough people have a big enough slice of the pie, the solution is to make the pie bigger. We could have strong ideological divisions if people instead perceived that the pie is finite—that if one person gets a bigger slice, another gets a smaller slice.

Bitter fights could erupt over how to divide the pie, and that could lead to ideological conflict and potentially to violence. There is a second phenomenon that could provide an engine for terrorism. That is the atomization of American politics.

Q What do you mean by that?

A I'm talking about single-issue politics as contrasted to an overall anticapitalist or nihilist philosophy, for example. Whatever the focus—nuclear power, antinuclear power; for the dam, against the dam; environmentalists versus developers; right to life versus the right of choice—single-issue politics tend to rob the system of its enormous co-optive capacity.

Already we've seen some willingness among some single-issue movements to break the law, although so far not to the extent of doing serious violence to either people or property. I wouldn't put their actions in

the realm of terrorist violence, however. That would be a gross exaggeration.

Q So, it's a big leap from the kind of protests that single-issue groups have staged in the U.S. to the large-scale terrorism occurring elsewhere in the world—

A It's a breathtaking leap if you compare what the various "cause people" in this country have done or contemplated with the terrorism practiced by the Red Brigades in Europe. However, the leap is not so breathtaking if you realize that most terrorism in the world consists primarily of what terrorists call "armed propaganda"—token acts of violence, little bombs detonated more for publicity than destruction.

Also, you should realize that terrorists rarely enlist or represent large portions of the population. At its peak, West Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang had perhaps 50 to 60 members. The Japanese Red Army, for all the troubles it has caused the world, has between 30 and 40 activists. We're talking about very small numbers.

Q Why haven't international terrorist groups staged spectacular incidents in this country as they have done in so many other countries—such as the raid on the Olympic Village in Munich?

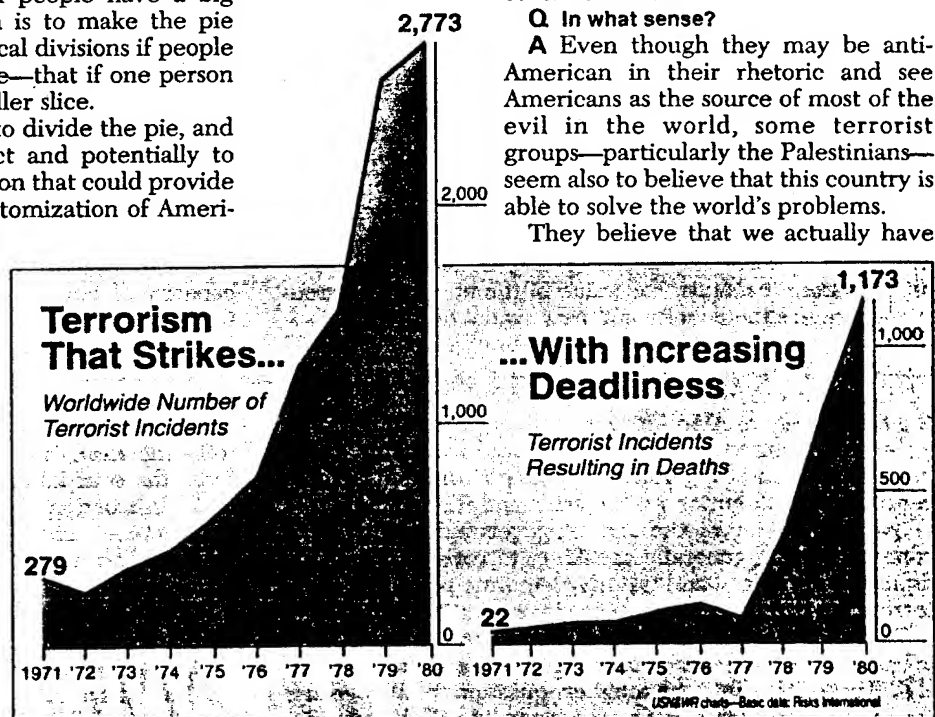
A The fact is, Americans abroad are the most prominent targets of terrorism. American citizens or facilities are involved in about a third of all of the episodes that take place internationally. Why not in the United States? Geographic convenience is part of the answer. It's simple for German terrorists to cross the border into Austria when the heat is on in Germany. But it's quite another matter to go all the way over to the United States. There also are bureaucratic obstacles. Visas are needed to enter the United States but not to cross most borders in Western Europe.

Familiarity is another factor. Palestinian terrorists and others connected with them operate in Europe because many of their members went to school there and they are familiar with European cities and the population. For example, there are comparatively large groups of Arabs in Europe, some of whom provide support and also a kind of concealment for Palestinian terrorists. The same is true for Turks and Armenians. Finally, many terrorists have a different attitude toward the United States from that toward other countries.

Q In what sense?

A Even though they may be anti-American in their rhetoric and see Americans as the source of most of the evil in the world, some terrorist groups—particularly the Palestinians—seem also to believe that this country is able to solve the world's problems.

They believe that we actually have



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Antiwar protesters in U.S. did not become terrorists because "political system co-opted grievances, best of their leaders."

the power to solve the very problems they accuse us of causing. So they seek to influence this country and, therefore, refrain from actions that would anger Americans at home.

Q Mr. Jenkins, how deeply is the Soviet Union involved in promoting international terrorism?

A The Soviet Union openly supports what it calls "national liberation movements"—groups it views as fighting against colonialism and foreign interference. Historically, this means any group that happens to fit Soviet interests in a given area at a given time. Generally, these have been Marxist guerrilla groups fighting Western-oriented governments in the Third World.

Some of these groups routinely employ terrorist tactics. Soviet allies—Cuba and Libya, for example—provide support to an even wider range of guerrilla and terrorist groups. And some of the recipients of this support—like the Palestinians—provide support to many of the terrorist groups active in Western Europe.

But there's no convincing evidence that the Soviet Union created any of these terrorist groups. They are indigenous growths, and Soviet support or exploitation doesn't imply Soviet orchestration, central direction, master plans or blueprints. People get themselves all wound up developing elaborate conspiracy theories. To me, that's a futile exercise.

Q What about the effectiveness of terrorists in achieving their aims? Are they more—or less—successful today than they were in the early '70s?

A Their ability to coerce governments certainly has declined. Governments have adopted much firmer attitudes. They've come to realize that if they continued to yield to terrorism, they would indirectly be governed by terrorists.

The impact of terrorists also has declined in terms of the publicity they can achieve. Continuing media coverage acts like inflation; it reduces the value of the currency. Repetition decreases the novelty and news value of terrorist incidents. The first hijacking is page-one news. After 87 hijackings, people tend to ignore them.

There are exceptions. A major hostage event—such as the kidnapping of Aldo Moro in Italy or the seizure of the American Embassy in Iran—still has a major impact on governments and the public. It forces governments to concentrate their attention on the crisis and induces a degree of paralysis as far as the rest of government business is concerned. But, generally speaking, terrorism is bringing diminishing returns, and this may generate pressure within terrorist groups to escalate their violence.

Q Are we approaching the time when terrorists may escalate to using nuclear weapons or threats of germ warfare?

A That gets us into the toughest questions of all, because the answer requires a better understanding of the terrorist

mind-set and decision-making process than we have now. What goes on inside the heads of the terrorists individually? And, collectively, how do they decide to do what they do?

Q You mean the possible use of nuclear weapons is a behavioral question, not a technical or strategic question?

A In part it is. Without exaggerating the ease with which terrorists may fabricate a chemical or a biological weapon, or even a crude nuclear device, the constraints are not entirely technical; there are also self-imposed constraints even for terrorists.

Q What are those constraints?

A I can tell you what I think they are. First, terrorists aren't bent on killing a lot of people. Terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead. Second, killing a lot of people could alienate people they perceive as constituents. The terrorists may, in fact, have no constituents, but they perceive themselves as having many.

Third, such an act could provoke public revulsion. You don't poison the city water supply in the name of the popular front and expect to remain the popular front for very long. Fourth, terrorists may fear unleashing an unprecedented government crackdown.

For these reasons, any suggestion of an operation involving mass killing is likely to provoke dissension within the ranks of the terrorists and thus expose the operation and the organization to betrayal. Terrorist operations must have a certain consensus behind them. To stay together as a cohesive unit and live a close life underground, terrorist groups must generally agree on what to do. That imposes a degree of conservatism.

Q On the basis of all the experience we've had with terrorism over the past decade, have any clear-cut answers emerged?

A In my view, there isn't a solution as such to terrorism in our Western democracies. The kinds of measures that would be required to end or eradicate terrorism are all too visible in the totalitarian states. There, the government exercises absolute control over the news media and everything else—weapons, movement, people, what people watch, listen, hear, do. It's so thorough that they don't have the kind of problem with little groups that we do.

Even if an incident were to occur in the Soviet Union, the terrorists would have less leverage. Without saying Soviets value human life less than we do, their primary interest is in the collective rather than in individuals. The lives of individual hostages would count for little.

We would have to look at the problem country by country. Strategies devised by Israel to counter terrorism do not apply here. Similarly, our situation differs from that of the European countries.

Q What should we be doing in the U.S. to counter the terrorist threat?

A That's primarily a police problem, and it's within the capacity of our law-enforcement agencies to handle. But there are questions about our domestic-intelligence capabilities and about the continued capability of the political system to absorb the forces that could generate terrorism.

One special danger that we should be thinking about is what I call "extraordinary extortion events." These appear to be increasing in the form of nuclear hoaxes, threats that force the evacuation of hotels, and other threats of large-scale destruction or disruption. This might escalate to the point where a city would be held hostage.

In dealing with these, the President would be facing issues similar to those he would face in a war or a natural disaster—damage limitation, evacuation, social disruption and rapid recovery.

Q So there's no simple remedy for terrorism?

A No. It's a lot more complex than simply saying, "Take two aspirins and call me in the morning." □